

Identifying and Protecting Unaccompanied and Separated Children

Lessons Learned from Counter-Trafficking Efforts
Following the Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine

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1. Background

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 triggered the largest displacement crisis in Europe since the Second World War, fundamentally impacting the continent's child protection systems. More than 1.5 million children fled the country in the first weeks of the war, often under conditions of acute stress and uncertainty.¹ As the war continues into 2026, millions more children have sought protection abroad. This state of acute emergency has evolved into a protracted humanitarian situation marked by repeated displacement, deteriorating services, and sustained exposure to protection risks, including child trafficking.² Among those most affected are unaccompanied and separated children (UASC),³ whose displacement trajectories frequently unfold across multiple jurisdictions and protection systems in Europe.⁴

Early warnings from international organisations flagged the heightened risk of trafficking and exploitation facing children fleeing Ukraine.^{5,6} In response, the European Commission introduced the Common Anti-Trafficking Plan⁷ to coordinate prevention and response efforts across Member States,⁸ while international organisations also responded, creating initiatives such as the UNICEF/UNHCR “Blue Dot” support hubs which provided early identification, registration, psychosocial support, and legal assistance at key transit points.⁹

However, the most important component of the European response was the activation of the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) in March 2022.¹⁰ With the TPD, the European Union collectively granted immediate protection and residence status, access to services, and freedom of movement to millions of displaced persons from Ukraine. For almost 1.4 million children, this represented a key protective measure: a temporary residence status, reduced reliance on informal networks, and facilitated access to support.¹¹ At the same time, registration for temporary protection offered, in principle, an opportunity for authorities to identify at-risk groups such as UASC, though the extent to which this translated into systematic identification in practice varied considerably across

countries. Conversely, the implementation of the TPD also revealed structural inconsistencies, given that this was the first time TPD was applied and therefore predated contemporary child protection standards and guidelines.¹² This left Member States to define their own protective procedures for UASC without clear guidance. Access to protection therefore varied across different European Member States.¹³ These disparities created a double standard: some children were swiftly integrated into formal systems, while others were excluded and therefore more vulnerable to exploitation.

Over four years into the war, conditions within Ukraine continue to deteriorate. Intensified attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure, including schools and energy systems, have disrupted essential services and eroded protective environments for children.¹⁴ Humanitarian access has been constrained by attacks on evacuation routes and aid convoys, while funding shortfalls have forced many local organisations to scale down or suspend operations.¹⁵ As a result, systems designed to identify, protect, refer, and support UASC at risk of trafficking have weakened at precisely the moment when needs are intensifying.

UASC displaced from Ukraine are exposed to a convergence of risk factors that significantly increase their vulnerability to trafficking.

1. The war has generated patterns of targeted violence against children, including documented instances of grave violations of children's rights,¹⁶ conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), the large-scale forced deportation of children from occupied territories of Ukraine to the Russian Federation, the use of children in armed conflict, and instances of forced labour,¹⁷ all of which align with established definitions of child trafficking.¹⁸ While examples of trafficking, these forms of violations of children's rights may also be the push factor that drives children to cross borders alone and become UASC to flee persecution and violence, as well as a risk factor for further trafficking and exploitation.¹⁹

2. Displacement itself creates structural vulnerabilities to trafficking. Movement across unfamiliar places, coupled with language barriers, potential loss of documentation, and reliance on informal support networks, increases the likelihood of encountering and being exploited by traffickers.²⁰

3. The collapse of livelihoods following the war, combined with limited access to social protection, has forced many families and adolescents into survival-based decision-making.²¹ In such conditions, offers of employment, accommodation, or assistance, frequently used by traffickers as recruitment tools, may be perceived as legitimate opportunities rather than potential threats. Evidence from humanitarian actors indicates an increase in exploitative practices, including transactional sex and deceptive job offers, particularly affecting adolescent girls and young women.²²

4. Technology has amplified both the scale and reach of trafficking risks. Children displaced from Ukraine are spending increased time online.²³ This has expanded opportunities for traffickers to engage in grooming, recruitment, and exploitation through social media, messaging platforms, and online gaming environments. Reports indicate a rise in technology-facilitated exploitation, including fraudulent job advertisements and online coercion, targeting displaced Ukrainian youth.

5. Finally, trauma operates as both a direct and indirect risk factor. Exposure to violence, loss, and prolonged uncertainty has had profound psychological impacts on the children of Ukraine. Studies document high levels of anxiety, sleep disturbances, and behavioural changes among displaced children, as well as reduced access to psychosocial support services.²⁴ Trauma can impair judgement, increase susceptibility to manipulation, and reduce the likelihood of seeking help, creating conditions in which exploitation can occur more easily and remain undetected.²⁵

These intersecting vulnerabilities underscore the need for sustained, evidence-based responses to detecting UASC and the risks to trafficking they face. Although

initial emergency measures were implemented rapidly, **the protracted nature of the war has exposed shortfalls in systems that were not designed for long-term displacement at this scale.** Four years on, the situation presents a critical opportunity to assess what has worked, where gaps persist, and how responses can be strengthened.

This study aims to translate lessons learned from the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on the identification and protection of UASC and their risks of trafficking into practical guidance for both ongoing operations and future crises involving large-scale displacement of children. This paper is guided by three central research questions:

- 1. To what extent have existing protection, prevention, and response systems effectively addressed the risks of trafficking and exploitation among UASC displaced from Ukraine?*
- 2. What are the specific (intersectional) vulnerabilities of UASC from Ukraine to trafficking?*
- 3. What promising practices have emerged since the onset of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine to address the identification and protection of UASC?*

To address these questions, the study adopts a mixed-methods approach.²⁶ The first research question is examined through a structured review of existing literature, including reports from international organisations, academic studies, governmental bodies, and civil society actors. The second and third research questions are addressed through qualitative data collection, including consultations with national experts, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups with practitioners engaged in child protection and counter-trafficking efforts. The research focuses geographically on Czechia, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia, countries that have served as primary transit and destination points for displaced children from Ukraine.

In doing so, the study hopes to provide an overview of the current state of play regarding the situation of UASC from Ukraine, as well as a baseline for recommendations for future mass displacement crises.

2. Existing protection, prevention, and response systems for UASC from Ukraine: country profiles

The first research question asks how far existing protection, prevention, and response systems have been able to protect UASC from Ukraine, and where the principal gaps remain. This section addresses that question through four country profiles: Czechia, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia.

2.1. CZECHIA

Czechia has hosted one of the largest refugee populations from Ukraine relative to its population size, with over 615,000 refugees having resided in the territory since the onset of the full-scale invasion.²⁷ UNHCR reported about 390,000 refugees from Ukraine in the country as of March 2025,²⁸ while earlier research estimated approximately 93,000 Ukrainian children in Czechia in April 2023.²⁹ By 2024, authorities estimated approximately 1,352 UASC aged 0–15 in the country, although this number shifted frequently because of changes in methodology for data collection. At present, no reliable data exists for children aged 15–18 due to the shifts in data collection processes, as this group is permitted to carry out re-registration for temporary protection on their own.³⁰

Given that Czechia is not on an external EU border or neighbouring Ukraine, it is worth considering how temporary protection is granted to UASC from Ukraine, as it can happen via several alternative pathways.³¹ If a child arrives with an adult (relative, acquaintance, or even a stranger) and both affirm a caregiving relationship, an affidavit is considered sufficient for the application. In cases of doubt, the child protection authority (OSPOD) may intervene as a public guardian. If the child arrives alone, a person (usually a relative already in Czechia) can request interim custody and apply on the child's behalf, or the child is represented by OSPOD or a court-appointed guardian. For children arriving in organised groups, such as institutional evacuations, accompanying adults or institutional representatives act on their behalf, provided their

authority is demonstrated by official decision or affidavit. If no such person is available, representation defaults to a caregiver granted custody in Czechia, the director of the receiving institution, or OSPOD. In practice, however, these categories are fluid and inconsistently applied. Children initially identified as UASC may later be considered accompanied once a relative is identified, while groups of children evacuated from institutions, which have at times been large groups accompanied by only a small number of adults have been variably classified as UASC or accompanied children.³²

Good Practices. The Czech protection response rested on a combination of general child-protection entitlements and emergency reception mechanisms. At arrival and registration points, including the Regional Assistance Centres for Assistance to Ukraine (KACPUs), authorities sought to identify vulnerable children and connect them to OSPOD.³³ Blue Dot hubs, as in Poland and Romania, also played a role in providing information, initial assessment and referral.³⁴ Within the national child-protection system, UASC under the age of 15 were entitled to guardianship and could be placed in the state Facility for Foreign Children.³⁵ This meant that Ukrainian children could access the same underlying child protection structures as other children in the territory.

Limitations. Implementation of the child protection response to UASC across assistance centres was uneven: in some locations, child protection staff were physically present, while in others they were only available remotely or children were merely referred

onward.³⁶ Registration practices often captured current living arrangements rather than the child's arrival circumstances, which weakened the system's ability to distinguish between accompanied and UASC.³⁷ A further substantial concern was the reduced obligation to register separated children over the age of 15, while by law these children do not have to provide information about their guardian, de facto implying they were not assigned a guardian, which created monitoring gaps for older adolescents.³⁸ This problem was compounded by evidence that low numbers of 15- to 17-year-olds were enrolled in Czech schools (17 percent) and instead remained in remote Ukrainian education or outside formal education altogether.³⁹ UNICEF-supported street-work programs continue to be needed in Prague and elsewhere to locate and support UASC approaching adulthood.⁴⁰

These limitations intersect with anti-trafficking concerns. The Council of Europe's Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA)'s 2024 reporting on Czechia noted the absence of official data on child victims of trafficking and called for stronger identification procedures and further action to prevent child trafficking.⁴¹ The lack of nationality-disaggregated child trafficking data makes it difficult to assess the scale of exploitation affecting Ukrainian children specifically. One group that has been identified as particularly vulnerable are Roma communities, who at the beginning of the full-scale invasion faced difficulties registering for temporary protection and consistently face difficulties in finding and retaining housing.⁴²

In addition, while Czechia's registration system for UASC enables rapid access to protection, it creates safeguarding gaps, given its simplicity and over-reliance on self-identification.⁴³ Affidavits are not robust evidence and do not verify relationships or rule out coercion, allowing identity ambiguity and potential misuse. The system prioritises speed over verification, increasing exposure to trafficking risks, particularly for children travelling with non-parental adults or in group settings. Safeguards are inconsistent, as decision making is procedural and lacks a mandatory best interests assessment. There is also limited follow-up after protection is granted, and no systematic cross-

border verification of custody, weakening oversight and continuity of care.

These weaknesses are further compounded by capacity constraints in the formal care system. The specialised Facility for Foreign Children has limited capacity, and earlier experiences during the COVID-19 period had already shown that institutional placement was no longer a feasible default for larger numbers of UASC.⁴⁴ As a result, some older adolescents were accommodated in dormitories, asylums, or shared housing without a court placement order, reducing the legal guarantees attached to their accommodation and support.

2.2. POLAND

Poland has been one of the principal countries of arrival for people fleeing Ukraine since February 2022. The scale of onward and circular movement has been high, with over 21 million crossings at the Polish-Ukrainian border over the course of the war,⁴⁵ one million of who still reside in the country under the TPD.⁴⁶ Among these, UASC were also identified, including children evacuated from Ukrainian foster or residential care.⁴⁷ The authorities created a special registry for children arriving directly from Ukrainian alternative care and for children arriving without an adult. Under this framework, 3,703 children were recorded, including 2,938 from Ukrainian foster care and 765 unaccompanied children.⁴⁸

Good Practices. Poland's response had a number of strengths, including rapid legal innovation and significant support systems. The most important development was the introduction of the temporary guardian mechanism for children from Ukraine.⁴⁹ This provided a mechanism, at least in principle, for appointing a lawful representative able to act on the child's behalf in matters such as residence, education, healthcare, and access to services. As of June 2022, 19,200 temporary guardians were appointed for 23,000 children from Ukraine.⁵⁰ Alongside this, Polish authorities and partner organisations put in place screening and referral measures at border points, including anti-trafficking information campaigns, police and border-guard procedures for identifying

risk, and referrals through Blue Dot support hubs.⁵¹ More broadly, some UASC were absorbed into Poland's national foster care framework; by May 2024, more than 1,000 children from Ukraine had reportedly been formally placed in Poland's foster care system.⁵²

Challenges. In Poland, separated children from Ukraine were not consistently treated as a distinct protection category at the point of arrival, nor were they registered as such.⁵³ Children travelling with a relative or another trusted adult were often treated as accompanied, even when they were in fact separated from their parents.⁵⁴ This meant that many UASC were not captured by the initial registration system and only later came under scrutiny, if at all, through family court proceedings.⁵⁵ In addition, weaknesses in the temporary guardianship system, including limited vetting, insufficient screening, unclear responsibilities, and cases of guardians overseeing multiple children without sufficient subsequent monitoring of placements, further undermined protections for UASC.⁵⁶ Reports of abuse and neglect within such arrangements, including cases unknown to public child welfare services, illustrate the risks created by delayed supervision,⁵⁷ particularly for transitioning to adulthood.^{58 59} Additional pressures arise from terminating services for children from Ukraine, including the impending transition out of the Temporary Protection Directive centres.⁶⁰ Another substantial source of risks to UASC from Ukraine are the legislative amendments adopted in January 2026, which expanded grounds for placing UASC aged 15-18 in guarded detention centres in Poland.⁶¹

2.3. ROMANIA

Romania has served both as a transit country and as a country of temporary or longer-term stay for people displaced from Ukraine. By spring 2023, Romanian border authorities had recorded more than 1.5 million crossings by Ukrainian children, while 5,835 UASC had been identified and registered.⁶² By January 2026, UNHCR recorded 203,684 holders of Temporary Protection in Romania, showing Romania continues to host a substantial population of Ukrainians over four years into the full-scale invasion.⁶³

Good Practices. A key practice in Romania to protect and support UASC from Ukraine is the *Primero* platform, launched after the full-scale invasion. *Primero* is an open-source software platform, managed by the National Authority for the Protection of Children's Rights and Adoption (ANPDCA) and developed with the support of UNICEF Romania.

The platform enables the early identification of potential cases of abuse, neglect, or trafficking and supports the implementation of all necessary measures to ensure and protect children's rights.

The identification and registration of children are carried out at the level of the General Directorates for Social Assistance and Child Protection, with support from the SERA Romania Foundation. As of the end of 2024, 36,220 children from the armed conflict in Ukraine had been identified and registered in the *Primero* application.⁶⁴ This system was designed as a mechanism for risk assessment, referral, and follow-up of protection risks for children fleeing the war, and recording information on children and accompanying adults, their location, service needs, and initial protection concerns. *Primero* was closely connected to UNICEF- and UNHCR-supported Blue Dot hubs, which functioned as frontline intake points at borders and in urban centres that channelled cases via *Primero* into the national child-protection system.⁶⁵ This combination of physical intake points and a national digital case-management tool is regarded as a best practice and as an example of interagency interoperability of child protection case management.⁶⁶

Romania also saw civil-society innovation in trafficking prevention. *eLiberare* Association's "*Kompass*" initiative was developed specifically to reduce trafficking and sexual exploitation risks among Ukrainian refugees.⁶⁷ The model is structured around four core components: (1) Community Coordination and Capacity Building; (2) Awareness Raising; (3) Vulnerability Assessments and Individualised Safety Plans; and (4) Assistance and Referrals. In practice, these components combine information provision in refugees' own languages with administrative

and logistical support, tailored safety planning, and referrals to legal and psychosocial services. The approach is implemented in close collaboration with other civil society organisations (CSOs) across Romania, representing a strong example of effective interagency coordination. It has since evolved into a scalable framework for protecting people on the move from trafficking and exploitation, with implementation extending beyond Romania to the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, Greece, and most recently Africa, where it has been piloted in Uganda.

Limitations. Official data reported no registered criminal complaints or investigations involving trafficking, sexual abuse, or violence against Ukrainian children up to mid-2023, but this should not be taken to indicate an absence of exploitation. Indeed, NGOs have identified cases of possible exploitation in begging and sexual exploitation in Constanta.⁶⁸ The gap between official statistics and NGO reporting is instead most likely explained by under-identification of these cases, whether because of weak detection, high barriers to disclosure, or limited trust in authorities. Additionally, the UN Interagency Working Group on Romania reported that data from Primero is often only gathered in communities following border crossings, leading to identification of UASC, but is not sufficiently disaggregated to identify children with disabilities, highlighting limitations to the system.⁶⁹ There also continues to be a concern that children from Ukraine are not integrated consistently into the national education system, with over reliance on online or informal learning, which could lead to under-identification of UASC and exposure to online recruitment and exploitation.⁷⁰

2.4. SLOVAKIA

Slovakia received a smaller displaced population than Poland or Czechia, with approximately 2.8 million border crossings by Ukrainians,⁷¹ with 151,000 Ukrainian refugees residing in Slovakia by February 2026.⁷² By contrast, by 30 April 2023, approximately 302,240 children had crossed from Ukraine into Slovakia.⁷³ Of these, 39,451 children had registered for temporary protection, while 153 had

arrived unaccompanied (47 in groups from Ukrainian institutions). By that point, only 32 unaccompanied children were registered as being in Slovakia, although civil society organisations warn of a substantial disparity between official figures and realities on the ground.⁷⁴

Slovakia's system relied largely on existing statutory child-protection structures rather than a Ukraine-specific guardianship regime. The Bureau of Border and Foreign Police recorded entries and exits of children, and temporary protection registration generated additional information about who was likely to remain in the country.⁷⁵ Where a child arrived unaccompanied and was identified by authorities, social workers assumed responsibility and child protection authorities were notified. The Central and regional Offices of Labour, Social Affairs and Family then oversaw socio-legal protection measures, including basic care and, where necessary, placement in Centres for Children and Families.⁷⁶ Guardianship applications were made through the courts. The Slovak government also adopted contingency planning that stated they recognised the heightened trafficking and sexual and gender-based violence risks faced by Ukrainians.⁷⁷

Good Practices. The Slovak approach had certain strengths. It avoided building a wholly parallel system and instead worked through established institutions with recognised legal competences. It also appears to have retained a distinction between cases requiring formal intervention and those in which children remained in contact with parents or relatives, including through remote communication, which may have helped prevent over-institutionalisation. Concerns had also been raised, similar to Romania, about the low school attendance rates of children, who rely on either online or distance learning, or drop out of education altogether, exposing them to risks of trafficking and exploitation. However, school attendance became mandatory for Ukrainian refugees of school age in September 2025, creating new opportunities for identification and protection of children at risk.⁷⁸

Limitations. In practice, Slovak authorities tended to intervene only when a child was clearly without adult care, when guardianship was required, or when concerns were reported.^{79 80} This meant that monitoring was only relevant for children who fit a narrow definition of unaccompanied status than for those in partial, temporary, or informal care arrangements.⁸¹ Internal records focused primarily on formally appointed guardians and younger children, while oversight of looser caregiving arrangements was inconsistent.⁸²

As in the other country cases, gaps in data collection are also concerning: Slovak official records provide very limited information on crimes affecting children fleeing Ukraine. Available figures refer mainly to trafficked children in general, occasionally disaggregated by country of origin, and do not support robust analysis of risks specific to Ukrainian children.⁸³

Another education-related concern comes from reports of children from Ukraine studying in Slovakia alone who are at risk for a number of reasons, including a lack of understanding the Slovak language without adequate support to learn it, an absence of legal representation/guardian, closure of dormitories during weekends and holidays creating an absence of safe housing, and psychosocial difficulties including isolation and trauma without available support.⁸⁴

2.5. SUMMARY: TO WHAT EXTENT HAVE EXISTING PROTECTION, PREVENTION, AND RESPONSE SYSTEMS EFFECTIVELY ADDRESSED THE RISKS OF TRAFFICKING AND EXPLOITATION AMONG UASC DISPLACED FROM UKRAINE?

Taken together, these four country profiles illustrate a broader pattern across Europe's response to UASC from Ukraine. At a formal level, the legal and policy framework is relatively consistent: children without parental care should be identified, registered, assigned a guardian or legal representative, and connected to

national child protection systems. In practice, however, implementation has varied and there are many serious gaps in guardianship and protection for UASC displaced from Ukraine, in particular for those who are 15-18 years old. What emerges is a fragmented protection landscape.

This fragmentation is particularly visible in how systems interpret and respond to different categories of children. While unaccompanied children travelling entirely alone are in principle identifiable within existing frameworks, children in more ambiguous situations (i.e., those travelling with relatives, informal caregivers, or within organised groups) are less consistently identified. Across Poland, Czechia, and Slovakia in particular, separated children were frequently treated as accompanied at the point of entry, delaying or preventing their inclusion in formal protection systems. Romania's more centralised case-management approach may have partially mitigated this risk but still relied on effective initial identification and consistent data use.

A common challenge across all four countries is the question of visibility over time. Systems are largely designed around initial registration and status determination yet are less effective at monitoring changes in children's circumstances. This is especially evident for adolescents aged 15–18, who fall between child protection and migration systems. In both Czechia and Slovakia, this group is subject to reduced monitoring due to legal assumptions of autonomy, while across all four countries examined this group of children is more likely to engage with informal labour markets and remain outside structured support systems.

Protection from child trafficking is closely tied to early intervention, but early identification itself is uneven. While the initial emergency response was quickly implemented, these findings suggest that systems are better at responding to visible vulnerability than at sustaining oversight or identifying evolving risks over time.

3. Vulnerabilities of UASC from Ukraine to Child Trafficking

The interviews and focus groups consistently highlighted that vulnerability of UASC from Ukraine to trafficking is cumulative: created by an interaction between legal uncertainty, disrupted care, economic pressure, weak monitoring, and the psychological impacts of the ongoing full-scale invasion.

The following section delineates three themes of vulnerabilities that were identified across practitioners:

a) the invisibility of UASC to child protection stakeholders, b) situational vulnerabilities, and c) structural vulnerabilities in protection systems that render them more vulnerable to trafficking. Across all categories, the trafficking of UASC can be understood as the result of evolving risks over time, intersected by a failure of child protection systems to monitor this group of children.

3.1 INVISIBILITY FROM THE SYSTEM

A central theme across the interviews was invisibility of UASC in Europe. Children who were initially known to the authorities after crossing the border, often later became difficult or impossible to locate within national systems. This invisibility was described by experts as a protection failure: once a child is no longer visible to the system, there is little to prevent trafficking and exploitation by both opportunistic individuals and organised crime groups.

3.1.1

Lack of tracing and monitoring of UASC

Experts consistently highlighted the gap between initial identification of UASC and monitoring and tracing these children. One expert explained the situation in Slovakia:

“We have thousands of unaccompanied children [...] nobody knows where they are, nobody investigates [...] some of them are working, some of them are going back to Ukraine.”

UASC may be registered on arrival, noted in school systems, or recorded by a local authority, but this does not necessarily translate into sustained monitoring. Experts also described children who remain physically present in a country but fall out of view of institutions because there is no mechanism to track changes in school attendance, accommodation, caregiving, or informal work arrangements. The responsibility therefore lies on individual professionals to monitor but, as one Czech expert said:

“Child protection services don’t want to be or don’t feel responsible to be engaged with 16-17-year-old Ukrainians.”

This loss of follow-up can expose children to trafficking in several ways. Some may enter exploitative domestic settings under the guise of care. Others may be expected to work in exchange for housing or food. Still others may move onward with peers, acquaintances, or adults offering support, without any authority knowing where they have gone or whether those arrangements are safe, exposing them to risks of trafficking.

3.1.2

Underdeveloped guardianship systems

The data also shows that the visibility of UASC to authorities depends heavily on the quality of guardianship and caregiving arrangements. Experts distinguished between the existence of a guardianship procedure on paper and the actual capacity of that arrangement to safeguard a child’s best interests. One interviewee noted that in the early stages of the response:

“Guardianship arrangements were approved even without looking into who the actual guardian was and how they sort of interacted with the kid.”

Situations were also described across the region in which a child was technically assigned to a responsible adult, but no one was verifying whether the placement remained safe, stable, or non-exploitative. In Czechia for instance, an expert noted:

“There could be any responsible adult coming for temporary registration [...] we would see like 19 years old [...] being a responsible adult for 17 years old [...] we still see one adult having like seven, ten kids, like teenagers, living with him/her.”

In addition, once a guardian is appointed, systems may assume that the child is protected and therefore requires less active monitoring. Yet experts shared examples of children in care arrangements where their needs were not being prioritised, where they were being used for labour or caregiving within the household, or where there was no effective adult advocating for them. In such cases, the formal existence of guardianship hides the fact that the child is in practice unprotected.

The problem is particularly acute for children who fall outside formal guardianship frameworks altogether. One example provided from the Slovak perspective was the situation of students from Ukraine, aged 16-17 years old, where children are enrolled in universities without any structured guardianship, protection, or monitoring mechanism. One expert described:

“You ask the university institutions ‘where are these children?’ Because they’re supposed to start studying in September? [...] nobody investigates. They disappear.”

3.1.3 **Transition to adulthood**

The interviews identified older adolescents, especially those aged roughly 16-18, as one of the groups most exposed to protection gaps, given that while they are legally children, in practice they are frequently

treated as if they should already be self-sufficient. As they approach 18, support may narrow rapidly, while expectations of independence increase as they are trying to navigate displacement, trauma, insecure housing, and limited access to work. One expert gave the following example:

“Many children were provided with temporary accommodation and now, especially for those who are transitioning into independence, into adulthood, they can no longer stay in the accommodation [...] which leads to finding a job situation out of desperation and risks exploitation.”

One expert observed that this transition to adulthood phase is particularly striking in Ukraine:

“In Ukraine, it’s more normal for kids to strike out on their own at sixteen [...] their guardians or parents may no longer think that they need help but they’re still out there and maybe vulnerable to exploitation.”

Another expert broadened this out more generally to Eastern Europe:

“Many want to support families in Ukraine [...] but while you tell everyone you shouldn’t accept offers in the informal sector, this is super prevalent in Ukraine, and for the Eastern European region, especially at this age, working informally is considered normal. It’s not suspicious because that’s how everybody does it.”

This is also notable in that both young people themselves as well as those in charge of their care view them as no longer in need of support. A Czech expert remarked a similar sentiment:

“It’s a mutual process. They consider themselves adults, so they don’t have any trust in child protection services. But some child protections services are fine with that.”

However, experts note that while they may appear more adult, in fact because of this reduction of care,

adolescents from Ukraine are at increased risk. They may accept informal work, move in with unsuitable adults, or travel to join acquaintances or friends because they believe they have no better option. Their age makes them less likely to trigger child protection interventions, while their circumstances make them prime targets for trafficking and coercive dependence.

3.1.4

Lack of documentation, uncertain legal identity, and risk of statelessness

Another way in which UASC may become invisible to systems is due to their lack of documentation and difficulties establishing their legal identity, including their nationality. Experts described UASC who were unable to prove who they were, establish their nationality,⁸⁵ or access documentation recognised by Ukrainian or European authorities. This was particularly the case for children from occupied territories of Ukraine, children whose documents had been lost or destroyed, or whose births had only been recorded under occupying powers, not recognised in the European Union. One expert explained how this is linked to trafficking:

“European countries won’t recognise documents issued in the occupied territories. And so if a child has everything destroyed, or just never had anything, [...] their whole life is sort of documented under occupation authorities or in Russia [...] they’re going to have a really hard time establishing their identity, who they actually are. [...] that leaves a vacuum where people are at really high risk of exploitation because they have no access to social services, they can’t open a bank account, they can’t do anything.”

Without recognised identity documents, children may therefore struggle to enroll in school, access health care, regularise their stay, or enter formal protection systems. They may become dependent on informal adults, unregulated transport, unofficial work, or ad hoc arrangements to survive. Experts also warned that this issue is likely to intensify over time. For younger children who have spent years in occupation, or who were born during the war without recognised

civil registration, future cross-border movement may expose them to severe protection problems. As one expert put it:

“It is an invisible problem that could just grow and grow, because more kids will be born in occupied territory.”

3.1.5

Discrimination

Children from some communities were already identified as falling outside of systems even before the full-scale invasion. Roma children in particular entered 2022 with weaker links to state institutions, lower rates of formal documentation, and less trust in authorities. One expert remarked that institutional reactions to Roma children were often characterised by resignation:

“Almost everyone you talk to would just kind of throw up their hands when it comes to Roma children [...] they’re just kind of like ‘well, what can we do about them? They make their children work, we can’t talk to them, they don’t have documents, so it’s kind of a hands-off situation.”

Another Ukrainian expert described communities living in extreme deprivation and in conditions that were already poorly mapped by state systems before the war, particularly in the Zakarpattia region, meaning that:

“Nobody has official numbers, even the government, because they didn’t know how many people live in this community because nobody could have visited it.”

This poor mapping means that, as one expert put it, “You can only speculate as to what is actually happening, but the ingredients for risk are there.” These ingredients: discrimination, poverty, poor housing, low access to education, and weak administrative inclusion reduce visibility, intensified by the war and displacement. Children from already excluded communities may be less likely to possess documents, less likely to be legally registered, less

likely to access formal accommodation, and less likely to be seen as priorities by institutions. UASC from Roma communities' vulnerability to trafficking is therefore a product of the war interacting with structural marginalisation.

3.2 CIRCUMSTANTIAL VULNERABILITIES

Experts described a set of situational pressures created or intensified by the war, that may expose UASC from Ukraine to risks of trafficking. These pressures, namely financial, housing, and technology, all work to increase the uncertainty UASC face and produce a need to sustain themselves independently.

3.2.1 Economic desperation

Economic precarity was one of the most consistently cited drivers of exploitation across interviews and focus groups. Experts described children and adolescents making decisions while facing financial stressors, particularly where institutional support had decreased, housing had become insecure, or family members in Ukraine depended on remittances. In such settings, children are less able to weigh possible risks associated with informal offers of work, accommodation or support, even if they notice these, seeing them instead as necessary opportunities. This leads to situations such as the following described in Czechia:

“The labour agencies they’re working in, definitely there’s labour violations [...] probably labour exploitation [...] kids work long hours, not paid, in the shadow economy. We know they are being exploited, but we don’t see the cases.”

Economic desperation was also described as operating within family and quasi-family settings. Experts referred to situations in which children were expected to contribute income or perform caregiving duties because households were themselves under extreme financial stress. These dynamics are often

normalised and therefore difficult to identify as exploitative. One expert gave an example from Poland:

“There have been systems even before the war recruiting Ukrainians to work in different sectors in Poland [...] from the perspective of a family who doesn’t have a certain financial pillow to go abroad and see what happens, you need some sort of security [...] they would rather [take] this type of offer- to help the family- over going as a refugee or a temporary protection beneficiary.”

Experts described children working in agriculture, construction, and other informal sectors, often without contracts, legal protections, or oversight. The experts therefore suggest that economic desperation needs to be understood as a function of how it interacts with weak protection systems. For instance, an example from Czechia was noted:

“There isn’t sufficient social support. They [UASC from Ukraine] need to work, and then the jobs aren’t safe because our labour inspection doesn’t have capacity. And the employers know they can exploit and abuse.”

3.2.2 Informal accommodation

Informal accommodation was repeatedly identified as a major vulnerability factor. In the early phase of the displacement response, private hosting and ad hoc housing arrangements were often indispensable. They enabled rapid shelter at a moment when state systems could not meet all needs. Over time, however, experts emphasised that these arrangements frequently operated with little vetting, little monitoring, and few safeguards. One expert also remarked that the drive towards informal housing is also exacerbated currently by discrimination in some areas against Ukrainians:

“When it comes to accommodation, a lot of advertisements would say no students, no pets, no Ukrainians.”

Children and adolescents in informal accommodation settings may depend heavily on hosts for shelter, food, transport, interpretation, and administrative help. This creates power imbalances, creating risks of exploitation for domestic servitude, labour, and sexual abuse.

Sexual exploitation was repeatedly linked to these forms of dependency. One expert stated, “When it comes to children, the risks are mostly in terms of sexual exploitation.” Another expert described highly informal shared housing and dormitory-style environments where exploitation could occur with little prospect of disclosure, because children feared losing accommodation or did not trust that authorities could offer an alternative. They note:

“Sexual exploitation takes place, especially in dormitories [...] they use the fact that it’s private property [...] it’s not as organised as it is in cases of [forced] labour, but they have such [...] bad living conditions that their friends or relatives abuse their vulnerability.”

Informal accommodation also intersects with labour exploitation. Experts described arrangements in which housing and work were bundled together, making it difficult for a child to leave one without losing the other. The child may be told that work is simply their contribution to the household or payment for shelter, but this may amount to or culminate in exploitation. In Czechia, the issue is exacerbated by a lack of formal housing options for Ukrainian children:

“There are not enough shelters for unaccompanied children in general, including children from Ukraine. So, I mean we can explain the risks, but then if there’s not another option but for them to work illegally and stay in an unstable housing situation then it’s hard for them to be aware.”

3.2.3 Technology

Technology was noted by experts as both a coping mechanism and a source of risk. For many UASC from Ukraine, the internet is an essential source of

information, education, communication with family, emotional support, and social contact. But that dependence also increases exposure to possible recruitment by traffickers. For example, one expert notes:

“Fourteen to 17-year-olds, especially girls [...] they want to see their boyfriends in different countries. So they leave Ukraine without their parents, nobody knows where they are going or who they’ll meet at the end, if there’s a real boyfriend or someone who just wants to use them. It’s a very common situation.”

Experts remarked that online vulnerability was closely linked to other risk factors, such as trauma, isolation, uncertainty, and lack of future prospects. One interviewee observed this phenomenon in Ukraine:

“Kids are very isolated in Ukraine. They’re isolated and they don’t really see future prospects. So, they turn to the internet for connection. And there’s ways that people will be exploited there.”

The interviews make clear that online spaces are now one of the main places where risks of trafficking manifest themselves for UASC from Ukraine.

3.3 STRUCTURAL VULNERABILITIES

The interviews and focus group experts also highlighted structural vulnerabilities, in addition to those of visibility and circumstance. These vulnerabilities relate both to limitations in the capacity and communication in and between agencies, as well as disruptions the war has caused to child protection structures both in Ukraine and the European Union.

3.3.1 Siloing of services

A recurring concern raised by experts was fragmentation of services. Child protection, anti-trafficking, migration, education, law enforcement, and mental health systems often operate in parallel rather than in an integrated way across the European Union and Ukraine. This fragmentation is even more visible

across borders. While an UASC may be known to one institution, or in one country, this information may not be shared elsewhere, leading to deficits in information and therefore risks and signs that go undetected.

Mechanisms do exist, particularly around missing children, as well as cooperation between law enforcement on serious organised crime cases, and between hot- and helplines. But experts stressed that these arrangements are uneven in practice, often dependent on personal relationships, institutional trust, or the persistence of individual caseworkers. For example, one Ukrainian expert notes how cross-border cooperation is strained even between border guards, and how reliant it is on individual relationships:

“There’s not very good coordination between border guards from different countries [...] there’s often a sense that they don’t want to or know how to communicate and there’s not good relationships between them, especially if a few days before that there was some case where one side missed it and the other side saw it. There’s always some conflict between border guards.”

Another expert notes that the issue is also present between disciplines:

“There are cooperation mechanisms, but there are big disconnects between organisations close to the ground who are actually doing the work and the very high-level government organs connected as part of these transnational mechanisms.”

This siloing can lead to delays in recognising trafficking: a school may notice absence, an NGO may hear a disclosure, and a police authority may hold separate information about a suspected trafficker, but unless these pieces of information are connected, the child remains unprotected.

3.3.2 Capacity gaps

The interviews and focus group revealed strains in capacity at multiple levels. First, training was one

clear concern. Experts noted the need for sustained repeated training for frontline professionals: teachers, labour inspectors, police, medical staff, judges, prosecutors, and lawyers. One expert mentioned the following example from Poland, highlighting the intersection of a lack of capacity paired with the overreliance on individual agency to decide what to do with a case:

“If someone like a school administrator or someone sees something, if potential abuse or exploitation is reported, that maybe someone may report that to the local authority, they’ll dispatch someone from the mayor’s office to look into it who doesn’t have the training. I mean, maybe they care, but they don’t care that much and enough to overcome the hurdles of investigating a situation where someone comes from a different culture and maybe speaks a different language.”

Experts were equally clear that training alone is insufficient. Even when frontline workers recognise risk, there may be a staffing shortage and competing priorities. In the Ukrainian case:

“The challenge is that sometimes border guards do pick up on situations that they see a risk and they’re not sure what to do [...] and they do military rotations. So they go to the front line as well. There are just so many competing priorities. And people are leaving every single service. So there are a lot of difficulties, a lot of stress.”

Additionally, even when risks are identified they may have nowhere appropriate to refer a child. One focus group expert noted, “we don’t have anything else to offer, especially with labour exploitation.”

Several experts referred to shortages in long-term mental health and psychosocial support, as well as a lack of specialised professionals such as child psychiatrists and trauma-informed therapists. Experts described larger availability of appropriate services in large cities. Outside urban centres, responses were often weaker, less specialised, and more dependent

on whether a committed individual happened to intervene.

Another noted issue was the lack of funding many services are currently facing. Since the start of the full-scale invasion, funding has diminished for services for children from Ukraine, meaning many are left with needs that institutions do not have sufficient resources to meet. As one expert put it:

“Our main donors have a much smaller budget compared to previous years [...] the child care system just didn’t have enough capacity, enough people who work there to help all these children.”

3.3.3

Risks generated by the war: mobilisation and deportation

Finally, experts from Ukraine made clear that the war is not only leading to an increase in trafficking of children across borders but is itself also a creator of direct risks to trafficking.

One especially striking concern raised was the manipulation of legal and family arrangements to facilitate adult men’s movement out of Ukraine to avoid military conscription. One expert described that as a result of the exemption from military service and permission to cross the border if a man had three children under the age of 18:

“Citizens used children from the care system of Ukraine. [They would] adopt these children and could cross the border [...] after adoption, the fathers just abandoned these children, and these children were at risk of trafficking.”

These cases sit at a juxtaposition of a risk factor of, and a case of trafficking: the case could be considered trafficking in itself, as a child was recruited, transferred, and harboured for the purpose of exploitation, but also could lead to a child becoming UASC and undocumented, therefore at risk of further exploitation once they crossed the border.

Experts also referred to the forced transfer of children

from occupied territories, their placement in Russia, and subsequent changes to identity, guardianship, or nationality that make tracing and reunification difficult. One expert described that these cases are often not concealed:

“A lot of this stuff isn’t super hidden because it’s done in the name of safety of the children [...] they’re kids who are vulnerable. They’re just brought to Crimea or occupied Ukrainian territory or Russian territory, and then put up for adoption on public, visible websites.”

A further concern was the use of older children and adolescents in roles connected directly to the war, including logistical or support functions that blur the boundary between child trafficking for criminal exploitation and child soldiering. One expert noted cases of “young Ukrainian men being exploited to engage in acts of sabotage against various EU states and even in Ukraine.” Experts noted that these forms of exploitation are not always recognized as trafficking, but as forming part of the broader pattern through which war expands violations of children’s rights.

3.4 SUMMARY: WHAT ARE THE SPECIFIC VULNERABILITIES OF UASC FROM UKRAINE TO TRAFFICKING?

The findings from both the interviews and focus group highlight how the vulnerability of UASC to trafficking is heightened through a culmination of legal invisibility, weakened support systems, economic pressure and uncertainties, and overstretched protection systems. Invisibility to the system was a core source of vulnerability. Children may be identified at border crossings, enrolled in a school, or assigned a guardian, but still disappear from sight once their circumstances change. Poor tracing mechanisms, underdeveloped guardianship systems, gaps in legal identity recognition, and the treatment of older adolescents as effectively self-sufficient all contribute to children falling outside of child protection systems. This is especially acute for separated children, undocumented children, Roma children, and adolescents transitioning to adulthood.

Situational pressures created or intensified by the war also contribute to vulnerability. Economic desperation, insecure and informal accommodation, and increased presence online all increase children's dependence on adults, employers, hosts, or online contacts whose may exploit them.

These vulnerabilities are then intensified by structural weaknesses in protection systems. Fragmented

communication between sectors and borders, limited professional capacity and declining sources of funding all limit opportunities to effectively identify and protect UASC at risk of trafficking. At the same time, the war has directly generated specific trafficking-related risks, including through manipulation of care arrangements, forced transfers, and forms of exploitation linked to militarisation.

4. Promising practices in identifying and protecting UASC from Ukraine at risk of trafficking

In addition to identifying vulnerabilities, the interviews and focus groups identified a number of practices from their national or regional contexts that could strengthen the identification of UASC and prevent or protect them from risk factors to trafficking. Across Romania, Poland, Slovakia, and Czechia, four broad areas stand out: protection at the border; collaboration across sectors, actors and countries; child-friendly and holistic services; and capacity building. These themes recur across the interviews and focus groups as practical areas in which response systems can be strengthened, adapted, and potentially replicated.

4.1 BORDER-BASED IDENTIFICATION OF UASC AT RISK

One of the clearest findings from the interviews is that border crossing points remain a critical moment for early identification. For many UASC, contact with border guards, police, humanitarian monitors, or frontline social workers may be the first and sometimes only opportunity for an authority to assess whether a child from Ukraine is travelling safely, is accompanied, and linked to any follow-up services and support.

Interview data from Ukraine and neighbouring states highlighted the value of border-based monitoring and information provision. Where trained actors were present at crossing points, they were better able to identify children travelling alone, children accompanied by unfamiliar adults, adolescents in potentially unsafe travel arrangements, or children whose documentation

raised concern. In Poland, one expert described:

“We have algorithms for police and border guards that are guides on identification and intervention processes for minor victims [...] we also implemented screening mechanisms that are offering humanitarian help to Ukrainian refugees”

These did not necessarily have to be border guards. For example, on the Ukrainian side, one expert described a system of trained border monitors, who not only screened for indicators of trafficking, but also provided children and accompanying adults with child-friendly information about trafficking risks, helplines, legal rights, and available services in the country of arrival. Experts regarded this as an important preventive measure because it gave children a reference point beyond the adult with whom they were travelling:

“Our monitors on border crossing points, often when they see children or someone who is very young, they provide a little more attention to these cases. We also have information stands and a lot of leaflets, information about human trafficking, and all the necessary contacts in the European Union, where you could call if you see something or are at risk of trafficking.”

At the same time, the interviews make clear that border-based prevention is necessarily time-bound. Once children move beyond the border, especially within the Schengen area, visibility declines sharply unless effective referral and follow-up mechanisms exist. For that reason, promising practice at the border depends not only on the training of guards and monitors, but on whether they are embedded in a wider referral chain. One expert stated:

“Border monitoring is something that’s very good. But what it’s missing is a referral pathway [...] like if someone is on the border with Slovakia and they see a situation they believe may be high risk, who can they refer this person to?”

4.2 MULTIDISCIPLINARY, INTERAGENCY COLLABORATION IN PROTECTING UASC

A second major theme with regards to best practices was collaboration. Experts identified multidisciplinary, interagency cooperation as one of the strongest safeguards against trafficking of UASC. Experts recognised that no single actor holds all the necessary tools or information. One expert noted:

“Cross-border cooperation between child protection services, social services, or the social services of Ukraine depending on the case of course, may be relevant because the information that will come up may give a lot of new light.”

Border authorities may identify risk but cannot provide long-term support. NGOs may have specialist expertise but lack statutory powers. Schools may notice absence

or distress but not know how to respond. Police may receive intelligence but lack child-specific case management capacity. Promising practice therefore emerged where these actors were not operating in isolation.

Civil society organisations were repeatedly described as playing a central role in identification, case management, legal support, psychosocial assistance, and referral of UASC at risk. In many settings, they were perceived as the actors most able to respond flexibly to individual children’s needs, particularly where public systems were overstretched, or slow to adapt. Several experts described local referral pathways in which government agencies and NGOs routinely directed cases to one another, depending on who was best placed to assist. This included referrals between legal aid providers, anti-trafficking organisations, child protection agencies, shelters, and community-based groups. Such networks were seen as particularly valuable where smaller or local actors had stronger access to a specific community, language group, or geographic area than larger institutions. One example came from Ukraine itself:

“In Ukraine, it’s genuinely an extremely collaborative environment [...] local government and national government are willing to refer issues that they’re not able to handle to NGOs. And [...] bigger NGOs are willing to look to grassroots NGOs to delegate to grassroots actors who really know communities.”

Experts also highlighted the importance of more formal multidisciplinary frameworks, particularly where police, ministries, child protection institutions, specialised NGOs, and shelter providers were all involved. From Czechia, one expert for instance mentioned:

“We have a national program for the protection of victims of trafficking. It’s a multidisciplinary cooperation of police, relevant ministries, and civil society [...] all of them run shelters, with hidden addresses. When it comes to kids [...] child protection services get involved as well.”

One best practice case noted by experts was that of cross-border missing children protocols:

“If it’s a case of disappearance, we have cooperation protocols between hotlines in different countries. There, we developed standard operating procedures, information sharing procedures [...] between police, there’s cooperation that’s established [...] and at the national level, cooperation on both sides between NGOs, police, and anti-trafficking authorities.”

Where multidisciplinary, interagency, and cross-border mechanisms existed and functioned, they improved the chances that UASC on the move would be identified and referred to services, therefore lessening the risks of trafficking. However, the experts also stressed that this remains one of the most challenging areas in practice.

4.3 HOLISTIC, TRAUMA-INFORMED, AND CHILD-FRIENDLY SERVICES FOR UASC

A third set of promising practices concerns child-friendly services. Experts repeatedly emphasised that child protection services should be designed around children’s rights, needs, and voices. This is particularly important for UASC, whose vulnerabilities are often shaped by adverse experiences, legal uncertainty, social isolation, and dependence on adults they may not know well.

One important practice identified was child-friendly legal assistance. Experts described case-based legal work as especially valuable in complex cases involving birth registration, lost documents, non-recognition of papers, or cross-border disputes over status and care. Such interventions are often resource-intensive, but they are protective precisely because they prevent UASC from remaining in legal invisibility. One Ukrainian expert described that, particularly for children without documentation, legal support is critical:

“[We need] somebody to provide legal support to these children and represent them so that they could get

the documents for them. It’s a really hard system [...] basically if these children who have no documents were abducted or went missing, nobody knows. Nobody cares because they don’t exist on paper, right? So they are very, very vulnerable.”

Mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) emerged as another important element of promising practice. Interviews and focus groups repeatedly showed that trauma, isolation, and uncertainty deepen vulnerability to trafficking. One expert gave an example from Ukraine:

“Children are being evacuated from these villages very close to the conflict zones [...] we see that these children are very affected by the war. There are a lot of challenges even to communicate with them [...] They lost their home, they’ve left their city, and now they should live here in collective sites [...] our psychologists work with all the pyramids of MHPSS to support the children with basic emotional support they need in this condition.”

While experts were clear that access remains uneven and often too short-term, they nevertheless stress that MHPSS can be a significant support to UASC. One low-threshold way of accessing this support is through child helplines, such as the Polish Empowering Children Foundation’s Ukrainian and Russian child helpline. Children contacting helplines may not need to identify themselves as UASC or victims of trafficking to receive support. As one expert put it:

“Part of the reason it works is because you can call them about anything. Sometimes kids call because they’re scared, or because there’s shelling or something. And then [...] someone who’s listening might be able to pick up on risk factors that the kid might not even know about.”

One important practice identified in the data is the creation of child-friendly spaces within border areas, reception sites, and public institutions. In otherwise crowded or unstable settings, child-friendly corners

can make it easier for staff to notice distress, build trust, and identify protection concerns that might otherwise remain undetected. One Ukrainian expert explained that these spaces were created at multiple sites and served multiple aims:

“We installed a lot of digital corners so that children could use it to visit school [...] we created a lot of safety zones for children, children’s zones at collective sites, government institutions, migration services [...] parents could leave their children just to get some services.”

These examples highlight that, as with multidisciplinary collaboration, child-friendly services are most effective when they are holistic. Identification and protection mechanisms are stronger when legal assistance, psychosocial support, child-friendly spaces, information, and practical assistance are offered in combination.

4.4 SUSTAINED, MULTIDISCIPLINARY CAPACITY BUILDING

The final area of promising practice identified is capacity building. Experts stated that protection systems cannot function well if relevant actors do not understand trafficking risks faced by UASC and do not understand their own role in prevention, detection, and protection. Interviewees referred to the need for repeated training across a range of professions, as articulated by one expert:

“Training for law enforcement, for social workers, teachers, labour inspectors, [...] medical personnel need to be trained, as well as judges and prosecutors and lawyers [...] we all know it’s something that needs to be done and repeated constantly.”

This capacity building should also include building an understanding of referral pathways and role-specific responsibilities. Several experts stressed that mis- and non-identification of UASC or trafficking are often the result of uncertainty about roles, thresholds, and procedures. One expert noted:

“Ukrainian services are very engaged in capacity building. They’re interested in acquiring new skills and gaining new connections. But the challenge is sometimes that border guards do pick up on situations where they see a risk, but they’re not sure what to do, and then the child just leaves their jurisdiction, and they don’t know what to do next.”

Several experts also emphasised direct awareness-raising with children and young people themselves as an important addition to training professionals. As one expert put it: “You will never have enough staff to deal with this problem. So you have to do a lot of preventative activities, which can be very helpful for children.”

Information sessions in schools, universities, and youth spaces were described as a practical way to reduce vulnerability.

4.5 SUMMARY: WHAT EFFECTIVE PRACTICES HAVE EMERGED SINCE THE ONSET OF THE FULL-SCALE INVASION OF UKRAINE TO ADDRESS THE IDENTIFICATION AND PROTECTION OF UASC?

The promising practices identified across Romania, Poland, Slovakia, and Czechia suggest that early, comprehensive, holistic, multidisciplinary, interagency, and child-friendly interventions and support are best practice for addressing risks of trafficking for UASC from Ukraine. Across the four thematic areas examined: border-based identification, multidisciplinary work, child-friendly services, and capacity building, a clear thread emerges in that protections rely on systems that are able to see children early, respond in a linked, coordinated manner and remain engaged as risks evolve over time. The findings can be summarised as follows:

Border guards, monitors, and other actors at the border between Ukraine and other European countries are an essential frontline resource for the identification and prevention of trafficking of UASC for Ukraine.

Formal and informal cross-border, multidisciplinary, and interagency collaboration between child protection stakeholders is essential. No single institution can act independently to prevent, detect, and respond to trafficking of UASC from Ukraine.

UASC from Ukraine who can access, through

multiple entry points, holistic, trauma-informed, and child-friendly services will be better protected from trafficking.

Sustained capacity building across all actors encountering UASC from Ukraine is key to making sure the above three best practices work in reality.

5. Key lessons learned

Drawing on the combined findings of the desk review, stakeholder interviews, and focus group discussions, cutting across all three research questions and the country context in Romania, Poland, Slovakia, Czechia, and Ukraine, eight key lessons learned emerge regarding the identification and protection of UASC from Ukraine at risk of trafficking.

These lessons reflect both what has been learned in practice, as well as where systemic gaps persist, and how vulnerabilities compound over time. Their aim is to distil insights that can inform both ongoing responses to the war in Ukraine, as well as be transferred to other current and future large-scale displacement crises in which UASC may also find themselves at risk of trafficking.

The risks of UASC to trafficking are cumulative and dynamic. Risks accumulate over time: a lack of documentation, pressure to find a source of income and housing, as well as social isolation reinforce one another, dynamics that are intensified when child protection systems fail to intervene or remain engaged with these children.

A key determinant in protecting UASC from trafficking is whether they remain visible to child protection actors over time. Initial contact at the border, through centres like the blue dot hubs and through initial registration systems is essential, but without sustained monitoring, children can, especially when they change accommodation, employment, or caregiving arrangements, slowly fall out of institutional visibility. This gap between initial registration and follow up is a core source of risk of trafficking for UASC from Ukraine.

While all countries examined have a similar legal framework addressing identification, registration, guardianship, and referral into child protection systems of UASC, how these categories are applied in practice varies substantially. Separated children in particular are often misclassified as accompanied, delaying or preventing identification and protection. The implication is that legal frameworks must be operationalised through clear, standard procedures that ensure consistent inclusion, ensuring all UASC have access to support and protection from trafficking. Identification and protection mechanisms for UASC at risk of trafficking work best when children fit clear, predefined categories of risk, particularly those travelling entirely alone. However, for the vast majority of UASC from Ukraine, the situation is more ambiguous: they may be travelling with relatives, informal caregivers, or in organised groups. This makes identification more complex, especially as it becomes unclear whose responsibility it is to monitor these children, leading to children falling outside of child protection systems.

UASC from Ukraine aged 15-18, those transitioning to adulthood, are at an elevated risk as they often fall outside of child protection systems. They themselves, as well as their caregivers and sometimes the legal framework around them, make assumptions

about their autonomy and independence, which results in reduced monitoring, weaker guardianship engagements, and lower access to services. This leads to greater risks of these children engaging in informal labour markets and housing arrangements and heightened cross-border mobility, all spaces where trafficking is more likely to take place.

The rapid expansion of guardianship mechanisms (particularly in Poland and Czechia) allowed for legal representation at scale. However, findings illustrate that weak vetting systems, limited oversight, overstretched capacity, and a lack of follow up meant that the appointment of a guardian was at times more an administrative process than an active protection and safeguarding mechanism, at times working to obscure risks rather than mitigate them.

Child protection, anti-trafficking, migration, education, and law enforcement systems often operate in national and discipline-based siloes. While cooperation mechanisms do exist, they are often informal, dependent on individual professionals' willingness to engage, and inconsistent across contexts. This fragmentation is particularly visible in cross-border cases.

Holistic, trauma-informed and child-centred services are both protection and detection tools. Legal assistance, psychosocial support, child-friendly spaces, and child help- and hotlines are structures through which risks of trafficking can be reduced for UASC, as identified early, and, when integrated with other services, ensure that children have access to the support and resources they need to prevent risks from escalating.

Taken together, these lessons learned underline that future large-scale displacement responses must prioritise the creation, expansion, and development of continuous, coordinated, and child-centred protection systems from the outset, to ensure that unaccompanied and separated children displaced by crisis are protected from risk.

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